

essential

PUBLIC SECTOR COMMS PLAYBOOK 2026



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Future comms made easy

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About

“Without data you’re just another person with an opinion.”

W. Edwards Deming

Every week, I'll read, listen to and watch dozens of links to keep pace with an ever-changing landscape.

This download contains just some of the key data I use in training and consultancy. Some of it draws from key Ofcom data drops and some is research I've commissioned and carried out.

Thanks to graphic designer **Stuart Marsh** for putting this download together and **Joseph Slee** for the TikTok, Facebook and Instagram research that put his graduate research chops to good use. Thanks also to **Elaine Massey** for her 12-years of invaluable help.

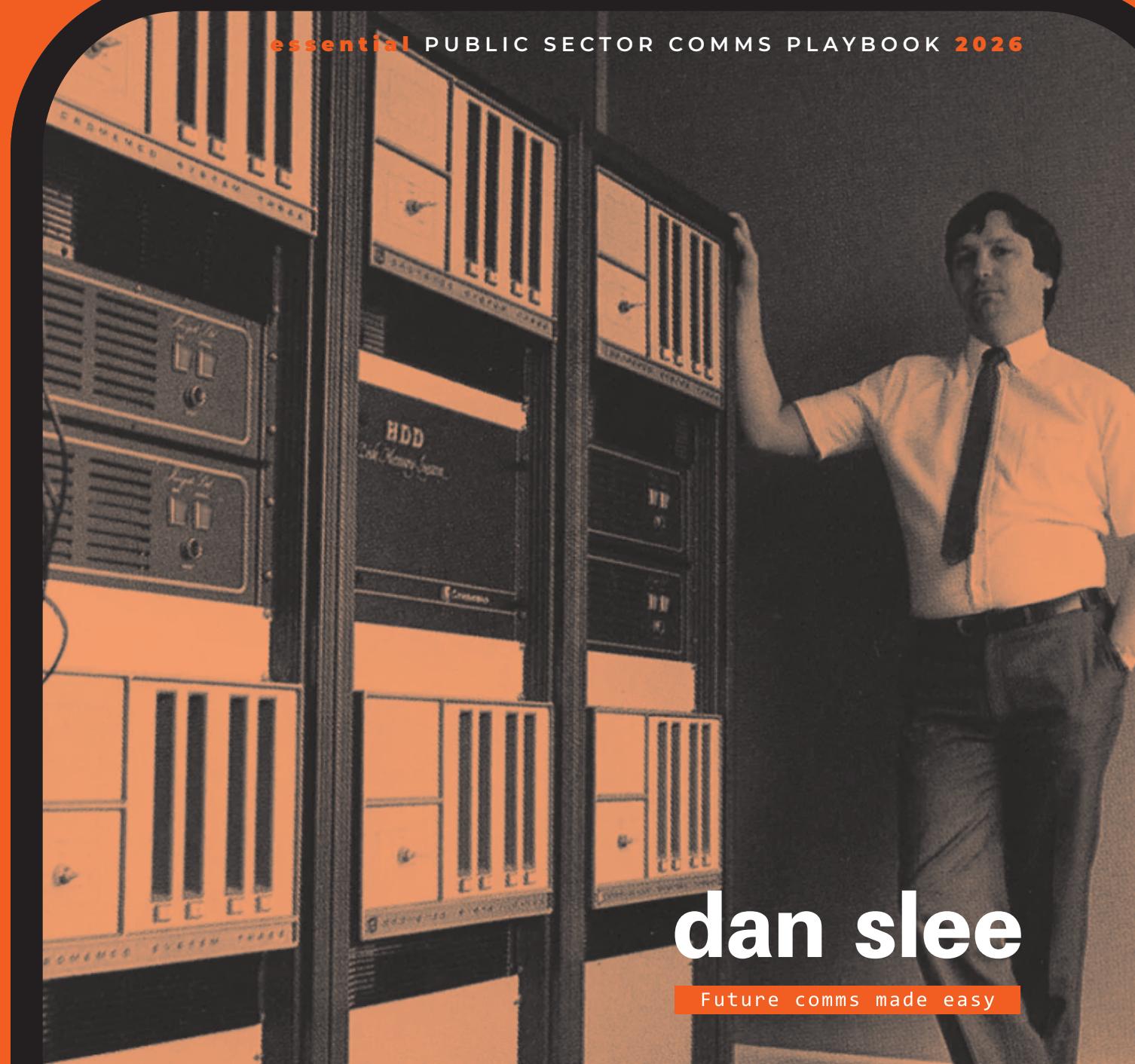
My name is **Dan Slee** and I'm a freelance digital communications consultant specialising in the public sector.

I help make future comms easy.

Shout if I can help.

Dan

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State of things

We have seen more change in the last 12 months than we have in the last 12 years.

We will see more change in 2026. But relax, in this download I bring some data that can help you understand the world you now operate in.

What drives that change? The tremors of austerity and Brexit have lead to cracks in society. Extremism and a lack of tolerance is around us. Local government in England is being reorganised in the biggest shake-up for 50 years.

Then on top of this we have Artificial Intelligence.

We have known this.

A former BBC technology correspondent was tempted out of retirement in 2013 to speculate on BBC Radio Four what the next 20 years will hold.

"The next 20 years," he said, "Are going to move so fast and in so many directions at once that we're going to have a job just keeping up."

You can be forgiven if your head is spinning.

The public sector communicator of 2026 will need a cool head and the ability to communicate their understanding of the shifts. Your calm authority will come from an understanding of the data that describes your changing world.

I want this download to help you start to understand the changing world. Drawn from my training and research it looks into evolutions in social media, the use of video, channel tactics and taking key steps with Artificial Intelligence.

What messages you have, what stories you can tell and what a difference you will make.

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UK Social Media use

Social media is in a state of evolution

- In 2009, it was channels to connect friends, family and brands.
- In 2026, they continue to evolve. GWI data has reported a 40 per cent drop in using social media 'to keep up with friends' and a 30 per cent dip in meeting new people.
- The social media town hall has gone as algorithms will serve more of your interests and less of your connections.
- A third of Facebook content is now 'unconnected'. You've not opted for that content but Meta's Discovery Engine thinks you'll like it.
- In the UK, YouTube and Facebook remain the two largest channels. WhatsApp has pushed to third and Reddit has seen an 88 per cent increase in users in two years to reach fifth place. X, formerly Twitter, continues to decline but not as fast as you may think.



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How is Social Media being used?

Percentage of the UK population aged 18 and above who have used a particular channel in the previous month. Source: Ofcom, 2025.

Channel

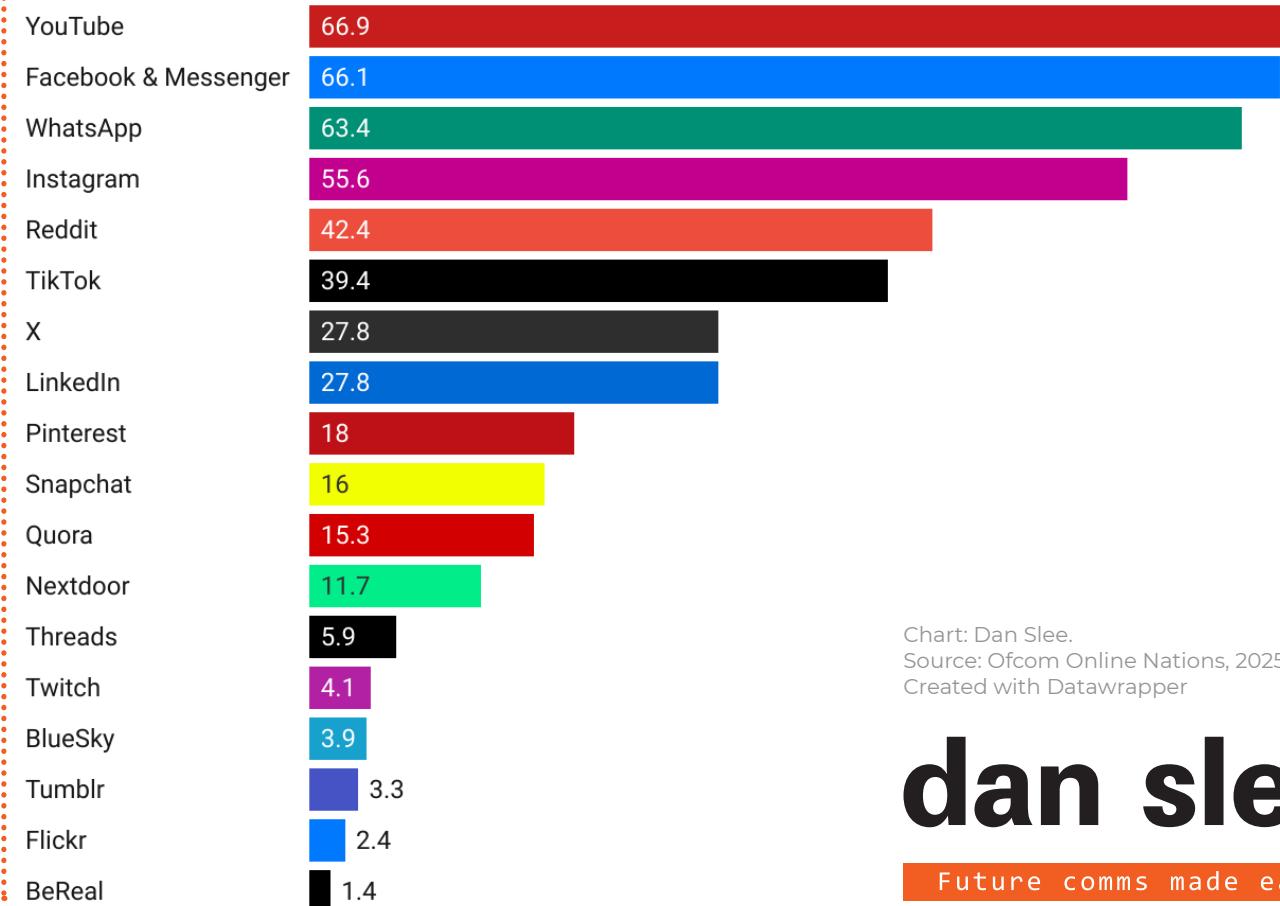


Chart: Dan Slee.
Source: Ofcom Online Nations, 2025.
Created with Datawrapper

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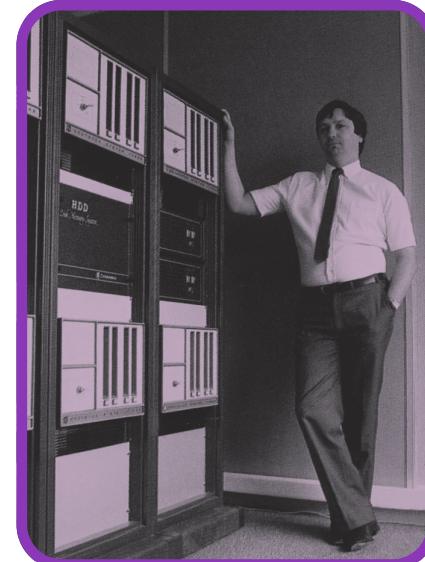
Instagram

More than half the UK population use Instagram every month making it a vital channel

- The platform started image-led but has strongly moved to become a video platform for vertical video known as Reels. Half of all time spent on the platform is spent watching video.
- Carousels of images and Reels work the best. Avoid posting artwork. That's an image with text added by a designer. Avoid toolkit content. These are generic national messages shared centrally.

Take a look at:

Police Scotland
Manchester City Council
London Ambulance Service



Instagram's Audience

Here is a breakdown of the channel's audience by age group and percentage.

Source: Ofcom, 2025.

Channel	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Instagram	85	81	67	51	32	20

Created with Datawrapper

Instagram best public sector engagement

More than 800 pieces of content from 50 UK public sector police, fire & rescue, local government and health organisations were reviewed to calculate these engagement rates. There were 700,000 followers on the accounts. Source: Original research by Dan Slee.



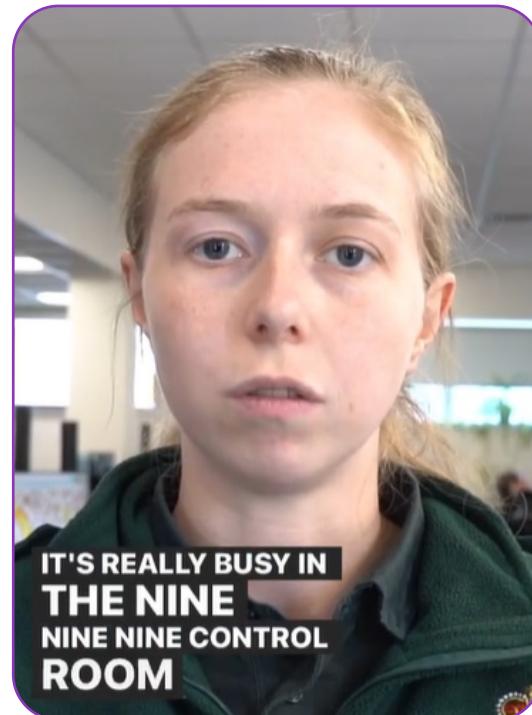
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Instagram - What good looks like

London Ambulance Service

Instagram here is a recruitment and a basic information tool

- Carousels of images are widely used alongside Reels.
- Staff front the message with high engagement rates showing how they land better with audiences.



Source: Instagram

This simple piece to camera Reel flags up extreme pressure on the 999 calls handling centre and got 1,000 engagement and 40,000 views.

A carousel of images tells the story of a training event through the lens of one paramedic.



Source: Instagram

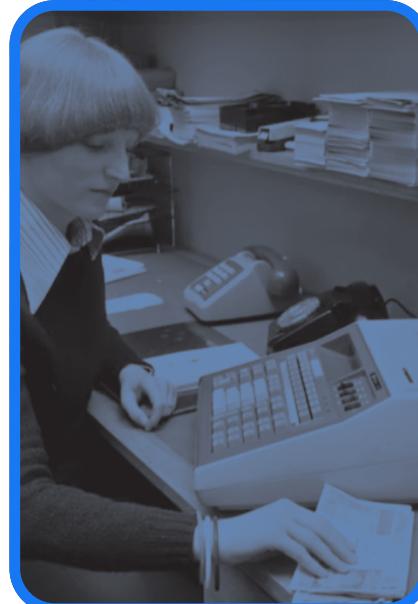
Facebook

Overall, Facebook reaches an older audience and the content type can make or break the message

- ▲ In this study, a single image has a short head in front of a stock image and Reels video.
- ▲ Facebook pages that work best in the public sector use locally-made content with local people. The audience likes to see the people who serve them in the places they recognise.

Take a look at:

Falkirk Council
Mid & West Wales
Fire & Rescue
Great Western Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trusts



Facebook's Audience

Here is a breakdown of the channel's audience by age group and percentage.

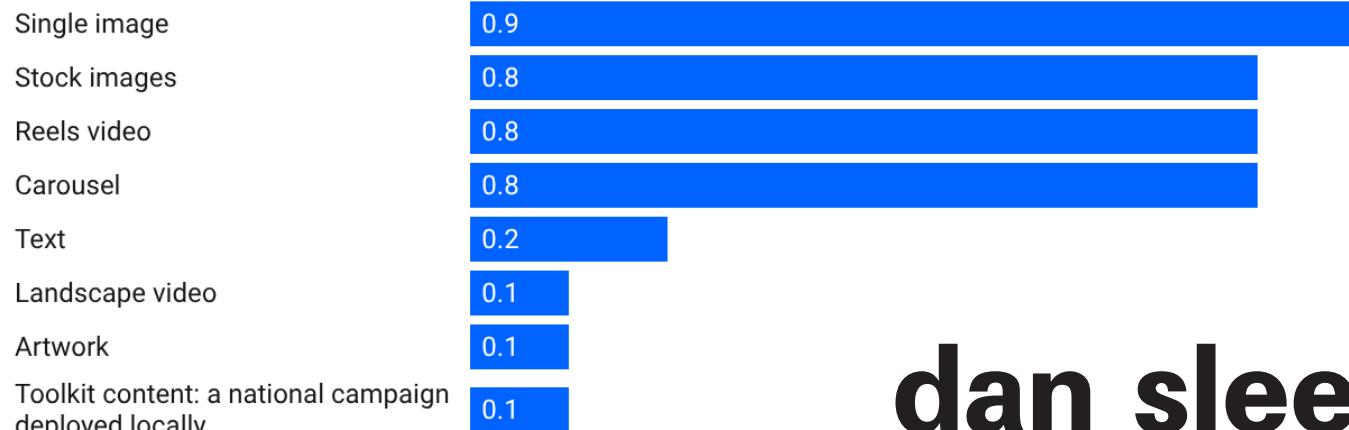
Source: Ofcom, 2025.



Created with Datawrapper

Facebook best public sector engagement

This shows the percentage of Facebook page followers who have engaged with different types of content. Overall, 1,000 pieces of content were assessed with more than a million combined followers across 50 UK public sector Facebook pages. Source: Original research by Dan Slee.



Facebook - What good looks like

Great Western Hospitals NHS Trust in Swindon, Wiltshire

With this Facebook page, the staff are the stars

- ▲ Good work is recognised and messages are delivered with the help of staff as Reels, images and carousels.
- ▲ Staff team shots perform well. The page sidesteps entirely the pitfall of using artwork or national toolkit content that performs poorly.

This Reel netted 700,000 views with simple advice on how to alert staff to a safeguarding issue.



Making staff the stars led to strong engagement in this carousel of images.

Source: Facebook

TikTok

While TikTok dominates younger audience it has now crept up to a mid-40s audience

- What works is perhaps surprising.
- A carousel of images with text proved to be the most effective. News is the second most popular type of content.
- There is a far wider range of content options and a far higher cut through compared to other channels.

Take a look at:

Kensington & Chelsea Council
South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue
South Wales Police

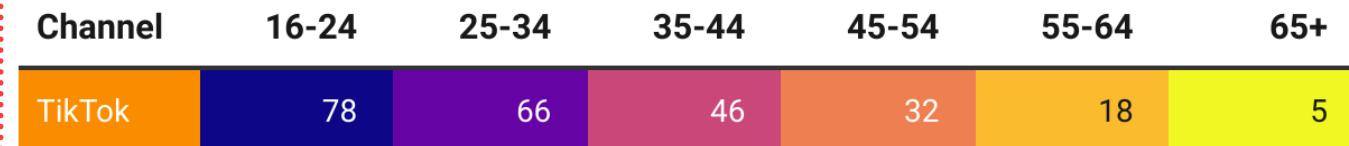


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TikTok's Audience

Here is a breakdown of the channel's audience by age group and percentage.

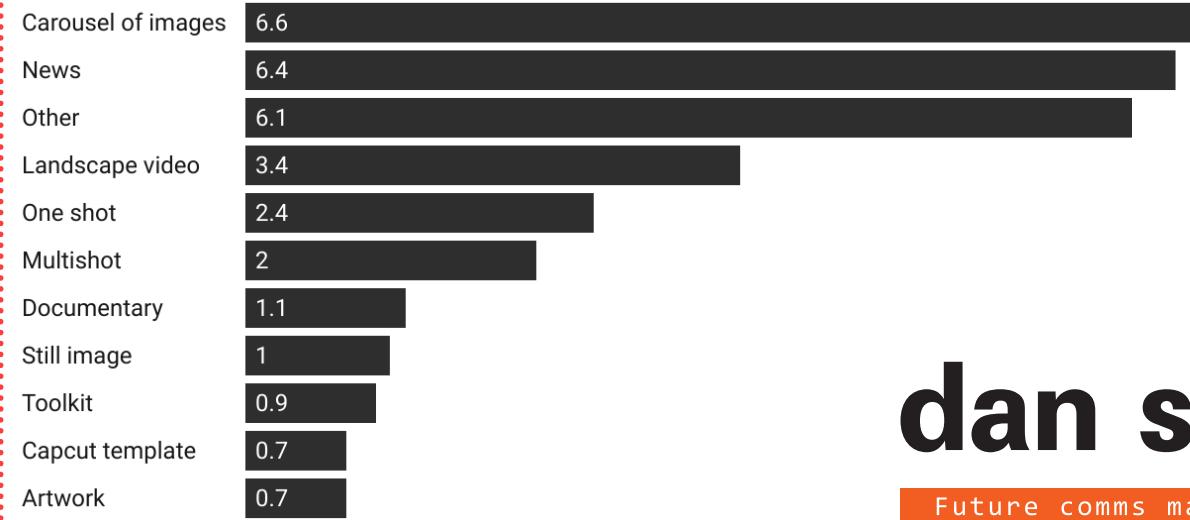
Source: Ofcom, 2025.



Created with Datawrapper

TikTok best public sector engagement

This shows the percentage of the account's page followers who have engaged with different types of content. Overall, 1,000 pieces of content were assessed with more than a million combined followers across 50 UK public sector TikTok pages. Source: Original research by Dan Slee.



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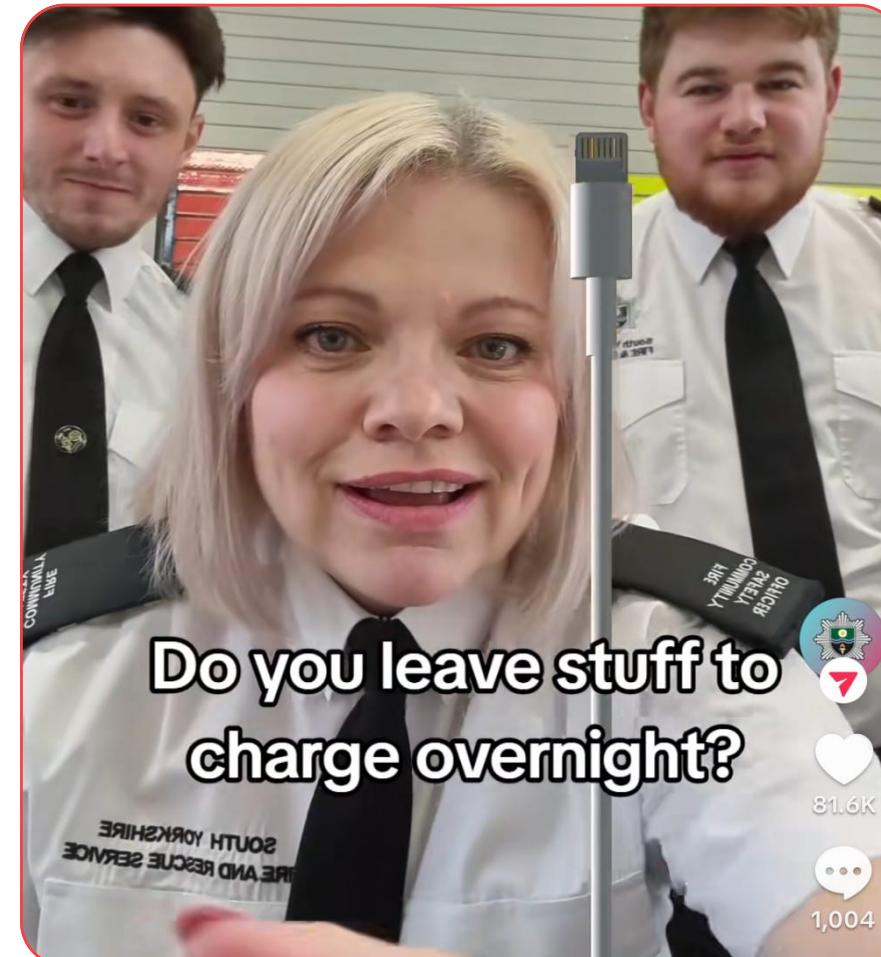
TikTok - What good looks like

South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service

South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue were early pioneers of TikTok in the public sector

- Their content is aimed at a younger audience with fire safety messages delivered with content bespoke to the platform..
- Firefighters and on occasion the public front the messages.
- While it looks entertaining and ephemeral the content almost always has a message buried within it.

Don't charge devices overnight - 2.5 million views.



Source: TikTok

Lots of people have no idea what to do if they see someone get into trouble in the water. Read the caption on this post to find out the steps you should take 👇



Source: TikTok

Street vox-pops which mimic creators can help reach a younger audience.

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Short Form Video

Video has become increasingly important as a tactic

- But one video will not rule them all. Make video bespoke for each platform. The line 'Don't make a video make a TikTok' is sage advice.
- What works on YouTube can be longer clips shot in landscape. Elsewhere, mobile phone-friendly vertical video dominates.



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Short Form Video optimum lengths

Data from socialinsider and other sources.

Channel	Minimum length	Maximum length	Optimum length	Shape
Instagram Reels	15 seconds	20 minutes	60 seconds	Portrait
Facebook Reels	3 seconds	90 seconds	90 seconds	Portrait
Facebook Stories	1 second	120 seconds	15 seconds	Portrait
YouTube	12 seconds	No maximum	7-15 minutes	Landscape
YouTube Shorts	15 seconds	60 seconds	15-60 seconds	Portrait
TikTok	3 seconds	60 minutes	21-34 seconds	Portrait
X	0.5 seconds	140 seconds	15-30 seconds	No preference
LinkedIn	3 seconds	10 minutes	30 seconds	Portrait

Table: Dan Slee. Source: Dan Slee. Created with Datawrapper

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Facebook Groups

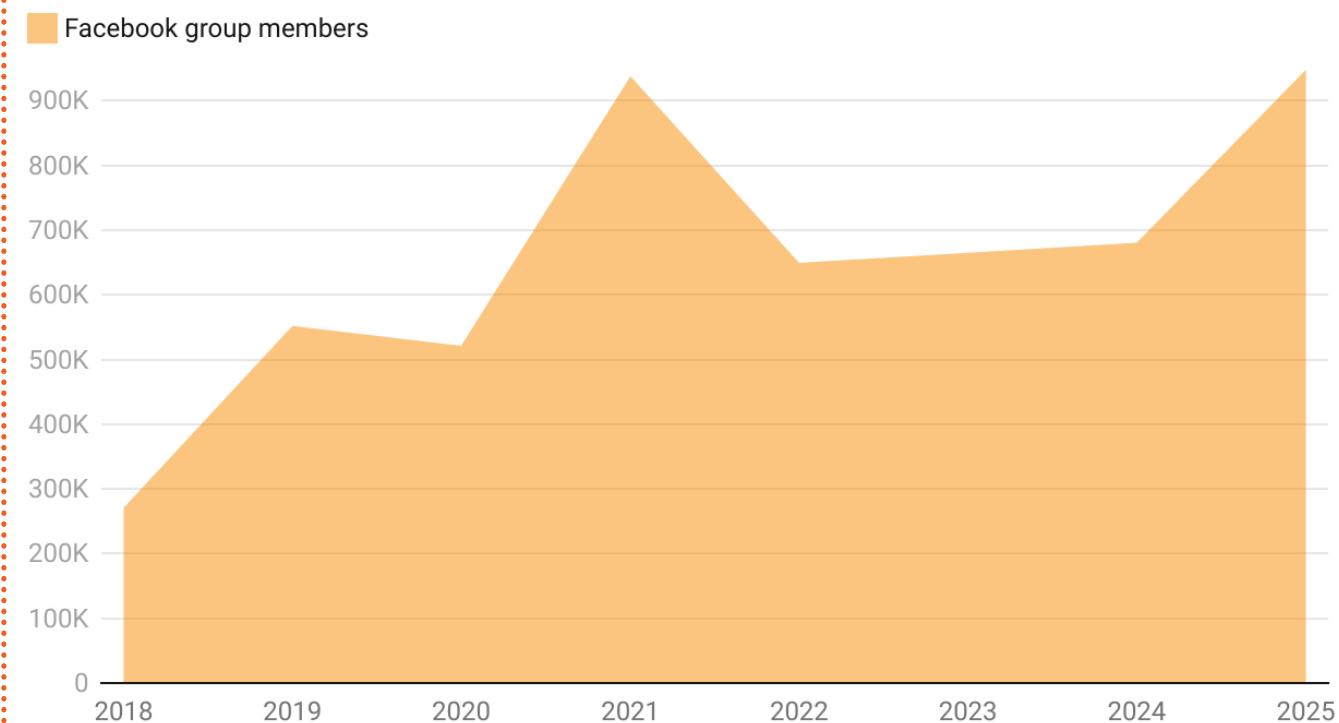
Two thirds of the UK population use Facebook and two thirds of them use groups

- ▲ Groups can bring together either a community of interest or a geographic community.
- ▲ Simply posting to a Facebook page is not enough. It will not find an audience without substantial ad support.
- ▲ Research in the town of Braintree shows the rise of community group membership.
- ▲ Post and then share to a group.



Facebook Group Membership

This maps Facebook group memberships in Braintree, Essex since 2018. In 2025, there are more than 900,000 memberships in the district which has a population of 150,000.



Created with Datawrapper. Source: Original research by Dan Slee.

Dealing with Comment, Criticism and Abuse

Social media's optimistic early days promised a Town Square where shared opinion are listened to with respect

- That's not the case in 2026. There is an overwhelming argument for using social media but it needs now to be more realistic.
- When people shout, strategies need to be in place.
- Have a set of social media house rules in place but also a flowchart with how to deal with noise.

Your social media house rules draws a line in the sand

Comment?

Allow opinion and play them back to decision makers.

Criticism?

Allow critics to speak respectfully.

Abuse?

Don't tolerate. Block.

Sheffield City Council 2 June at 09:30 -

Happy Pride Month!

There are lots of free events coming up across the city. Follow our [Sheffield Events](#) Facebook page to keep up with the latest. You can also subscribe to our free Sheffield Events newsletter. Sign up to our newsletter: <https://public.govdelivery.com/.../UKSHEFFIELD/signup/14027>

Photo: SteelCitySnapper



Author
Sheffield City Council
We're proud to support Pride events that bring people together and celebrate Sheffield's LGBTQ+ communities. There is no room for hate speech on our social media channels and we will remove, report and/or block comments that break our house rules: <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/you.../social-media-house-rules>

2w Like Reply 58 

SHEFFIELD.GOV.UK
Social media house rules | Sheffield City Council

What good looks like:
Sheffield City Council

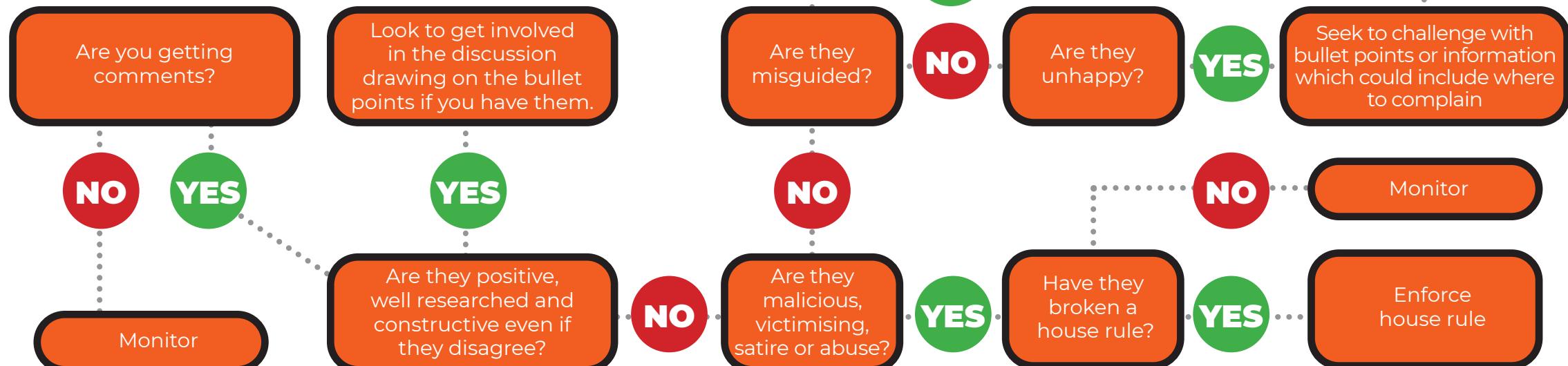
- This busy city council has clear social media house rules.
- On issues which can attract trolling they are clear to remind people of the rules.

Dealing with Comment, Criticism and Abuse

You are about to post online



You have posted online



Sources of News

The news landscape is splintered and how a 26 and a 66-year-old consume headlines are worlds apart

The print world has collapsed into irrelevance and newspapers have morphed into 'news brands.'

Young People

- It's a myth under 34-year-olds aren't interested in news.
- They are. They just consume it in a different way. They are three times as likely to find their news on social media than over 65s.

Thirty Something

- Those in their thirties are likely to pick up their news as they scroll through Facebook or other social media.

Forty Somethings

- Now TV news starts to come into its own along with Facebook.

Fifty Somethings

- TV news and radio come to the fore but run alongside Facebook.

Sixty and Above

- Television is king for retirement age people in the UK although with the majority of this group online also seeing news on Facebook.

Channel	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Any news all social media	75	67	63	52	38	22
Television	43	46	56	69	74	80
Local news all social media	34	37	44	50	49	51
BBC website	65	64	56	58	62	64
National newspaper website	31	48	42	40	41	47
Facebook for news	44	56	62	66	68	59
Instagram for news	53	42	41	24	17	13
WhatsApp for news	23	25	27	21	21	26
TikTok for news	46	26	17	13	10	5
YouTube for news	45	35	36	31	27	21
Podcast	19	20	19	11	10	5
Printed local daily newspaper	2	0	4	6	3	7
Printed local weekly newspaper	2	0	0	2	4	4
Local newspaper website or app	3	2	5	7	8	10

UK sources of news by age demographic

Source: Ofcom 'News Consumption Survey,' 2025.



AI Policy

Public sector comms sits in a Wild West territory with Artificial Intelligence (AI)

People are experimenting often without the guardrails of a policy that prevents misuse.

Less than half of public sector bodies have an organisation-wide policy. These figures have emerged in a rolling AI attitudes and practice survey I've carried out.

Many communicators are therefore playing with fire. A third are using their own devices and tools to sidestep blockages.

Just one in ten public sector communications teams have their own policy and 45 per cent don't admit they use AI.

This lack of oversight, transparency and best practice is terrifying. The public sector is struggling to understand how to make AI work safely.

This is storing up the potential for future trouble.

Elsewhere in the survey, public sector comms show they are using AI. Ninety six per cent of people have used AI in the workplace in the past 12-months. Thirty four per cent of survey participants are now using it daily while attitudes remain a combination of excitement and worry.

Idea generation (84 per cent) remains the biggest single use of AI ahead of spell check and grammar (51 per cent).

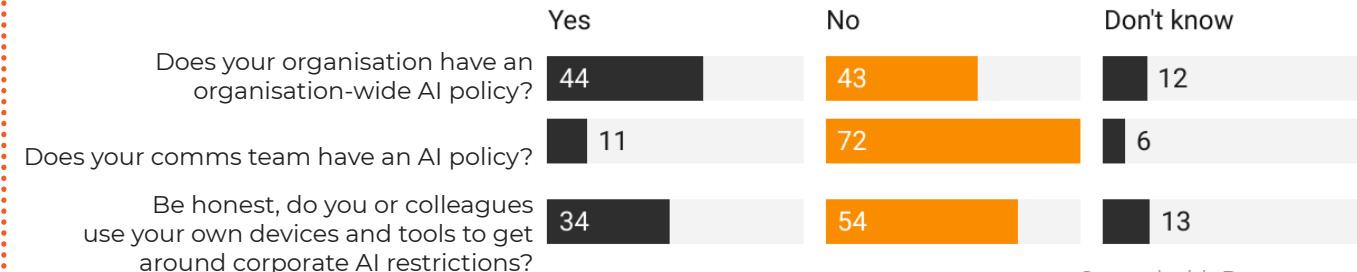
More than 500 people took part in this rolling AI survey in Summer and again in Autumn 2025.

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AI policies

Public sector comms and PR people by percentage. Autumn 2025.

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know



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What an AI Policy looks like

AI policy principles compared

- ★ This is a review of the main points of AI policies.
- ★ A 'yes' answer means the area is covered directly in the principles. 'Indirectly' means this is covered indirectly in the principles. No, means they are not tackled directly in the principles.
- ★ Each organisation will frame their policies to meet their organisation's policies.
- ★ These are a selection of principles.



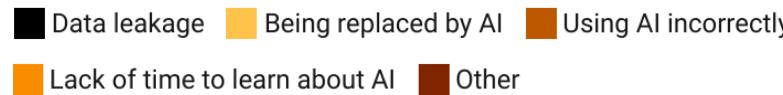
	NHS Confederation AI operating guidelines	UK Government AI playbook	GCS Generative AI policy	Scottish Government AI Playbook	Welsh Government AI overview	Friends of the Earth AI policy	Police Chiefs Council AI playbook for policing
Fairness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	Yes
Privacy	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	Indirectly	Indirectly	Indirectly	Yes
Inclusiveness and plain language	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Transparency	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Humans oversight	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	No	Yes
Know limitations	No	Yes	No	Indirectly	Indirectly	No	Indirectly
Use the right tool	No	Yes	No	Indirectly	No	No	Yes
Work with commercial colleagues	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	Indirectly	Indirectly
Have the right skills and expertise	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Indirectly	Yes
International collaboration	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Indirectly
Use alongside organisation's policies	No	Yes	Yes	Indirectly	Yes	No	Yes
Ongoing research	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Encourage curiosity	No	No	Indirectly	Indirectly	Indirectly	Yes	Indirectly
Sustainable	No	No	No	No	Indirectly	Yes	No

Table: Dan Slee. Created with Datawrapper

AI

Q: What worries you about AI?

Public sector comms and PR people by percentage. Autumn 2025.



Created with Datawrapper

Q: Thinking about using AI for work, how often do you use it if at all?

Public sector comms and PR people by percentage. Autumn 2025.



Chart: Dan Slee. Source: Dan Slee. Created with Datawrapper

Q: How would you describe your attitude to AI?

Public sector comms and PR people by percentage. Summer and Autumn 2025.



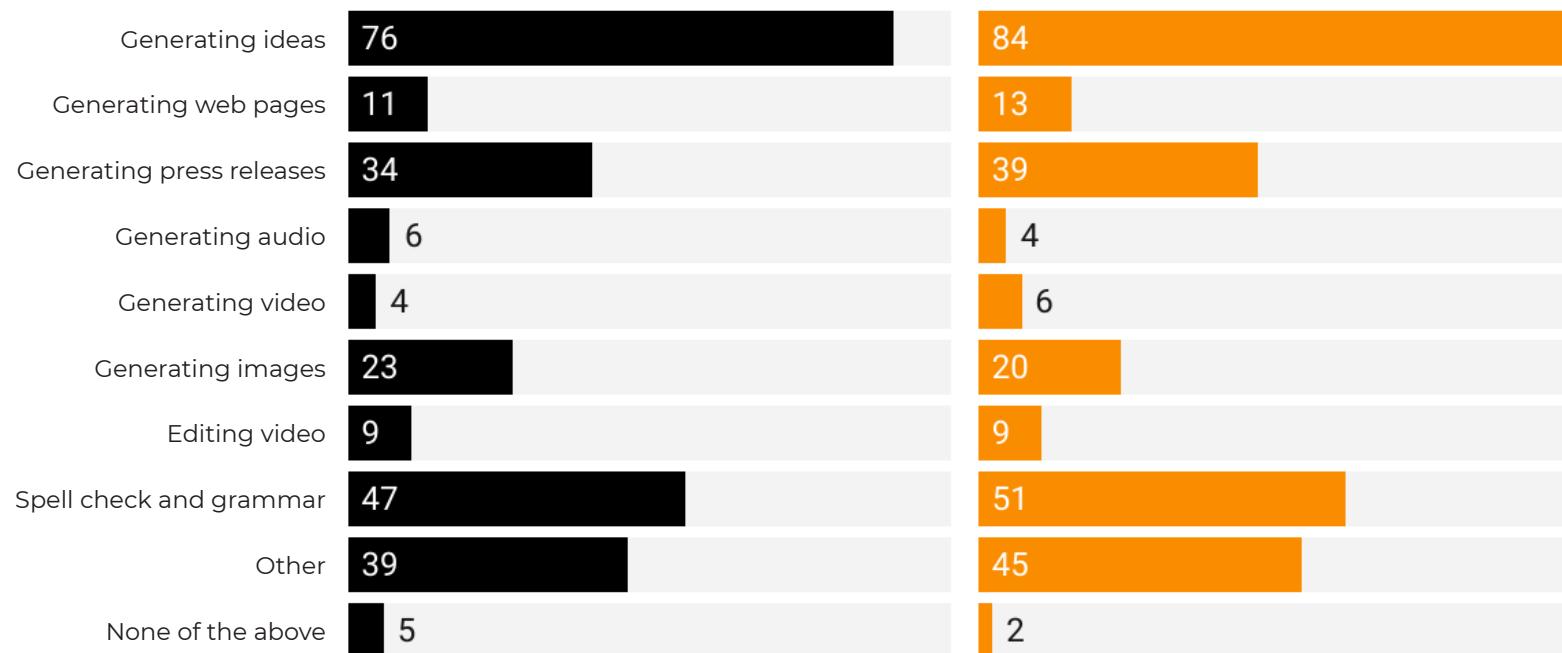
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AI

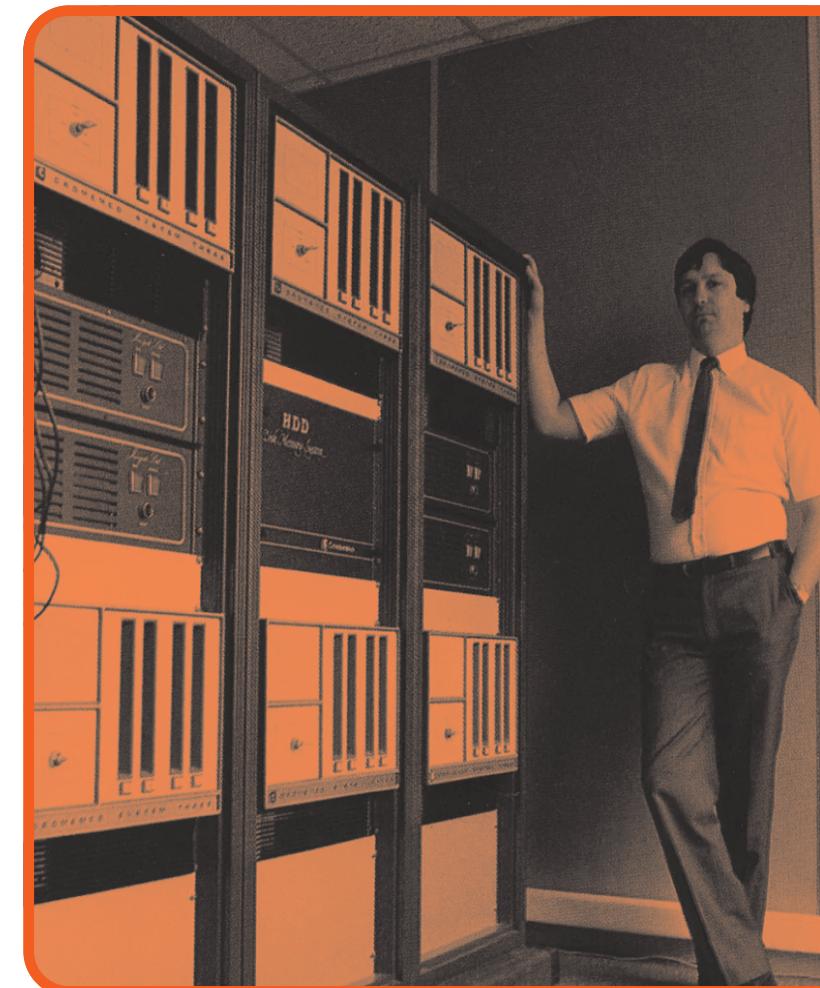
Q: What do you or your team use AI for?

Public sector comms and PR by percentage. Summer & Autumn 2025.

■ Summer ■ Autumn



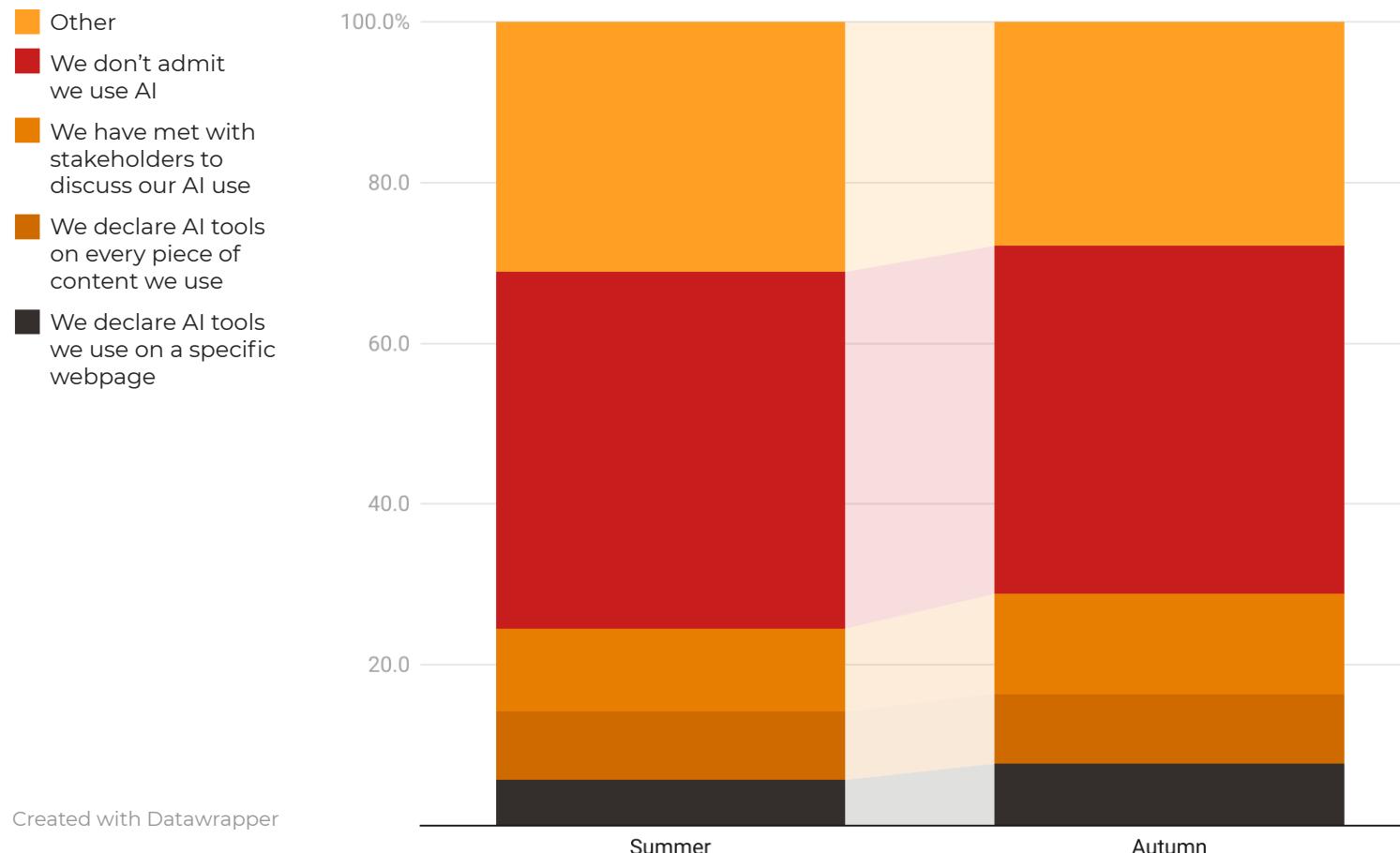
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AI

Q: How open and transparent is your organisation?

Public sector comms and PR by percentage. Summer & Autumn 2025.



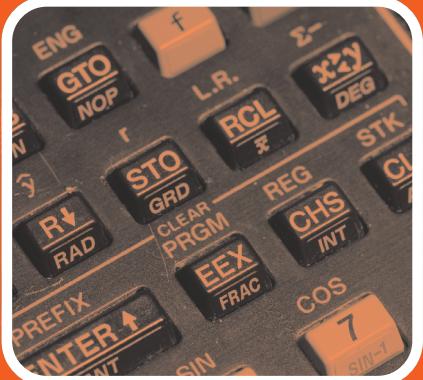
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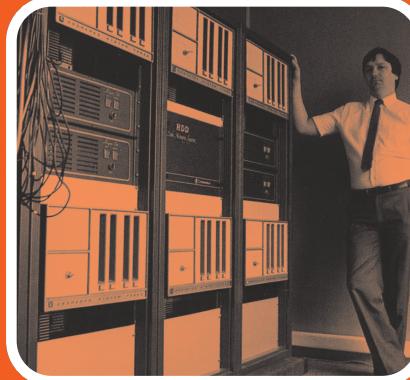
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So you better plan, shoot, edit and post effective comms video.

**essential****ESSENTIAL MEDIA
RELATIONS**

How to pitch to a busy journalist and deal with a media query.

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Credits

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Two women with 80s computers by Deutsche Fotothek, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6475007>

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Computer buttons by iStock.

The President comes to Washington Tyne & Wear Museums https://www.flickr.com/photos/twm_news/

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Women with computer by Alamy.



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